

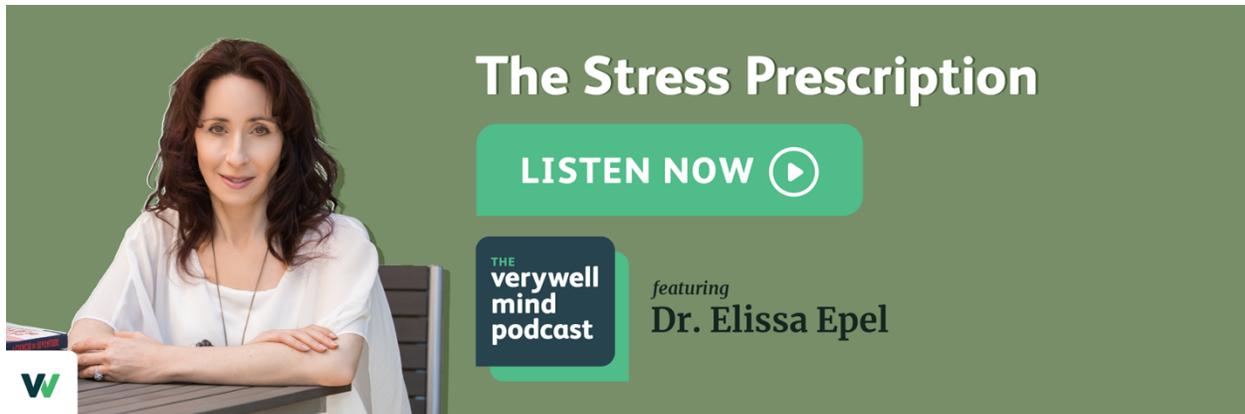


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WITH THERAPIST
Amy Morin

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238 — The Stress Prescription with Dr. Elissa Epel

Amy Morin:

Welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*! I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four (soon to be five) books on mental strength. In just a few weeks, my first-ever workbook hits the shelves. It's called *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do Workbook*, and it's filled with mental strength-building exercises straight from my therapy office. It'll be available in the stores on February 28th, but you can pre-order it right now so you could be one of the first people to get your hands on a copy.

Every Monday, I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to the show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week. Now, let's dive into today's episode!

Do you feel stressed most of the time? Do you struggle to find stress relievers that can actually help you feel better? Do you sometimes reach for things that give you temporary relief, but ultimately those things add to your long-term stress? If you answered yes to any of those questions, you're in the right place. Today we're talking about strategies that can help you manage stress in a healthy way. My guest is Dr. Elissa Epel. She's a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California. Much of her research focuses on healthy aging. She's also the author of a

new book called *The Stress Prescription*. Some of the things she talks about today are the differences between chronic and acute stress, the most effective strategies for managing your stress, and strategies for getting deep rest. Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist's Take! It's the part of the show where I'll share how you can apply Dr. Epel's strategies to your own life. So here's Dr. Elissa Epel on how managing your stress can help you grow mentally stronger!

Amy Morin:

Dr. Elissa Epel, welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*!

Elissa Epel:

Thank you, Amy. Happy to be here.

Amy Morin:

So you just launched a book called *The Stress Prescription*, and I can't think of a better time in the world than to launch a book about stress because everybody seems so stressed out these days, right?

Elissa Epel:

Absolutely. I mean, we want 2023 to be different, but not that much has changed in our last three pandemic years, although there certainly is a trend, a trend of getting better, but...

Amy Morin:

What are you finding after the pandemic in terms of our stress levels? I think we expected our stress to go down once things return to the "normal," but I'm hearing from people that they're just as stressed out if not more stressed out than they were before. What are you finding?

Elissa Epel:

I agree that stress has not gone away. It's maybe morphed a little bit so that we're feeling more of the kind of fatigue type stress and more the languishing that Adam Grant has talked about. It's more this long-term routine that we've been in that is not fresh and exciting and we can't rely on plans like we used to. So I think we are feeling the marathon.

Amy Morin:

And do you find that people are able to accurately gauge their stress level? The reason I ask this is I taught a stress management class at Northeastern University for a couple of semesters. And as part of that, the students would gauge how stressed out they are,. Almost every single one of them would greatly underestimate how stressed they were. They would then take this quiz that would kind of tell them "Actually, you're this stressed out." And they were really surprised to say, "You know what? I hadn't realized that I was as stressed as I am" despite the fact that most of them were first year college students. Do you find that happens in general outside of the student population too?

Elissa Epel:

That's fascinating. I think that in certain subgroups, it's kind of cool to be stressed. It's a badge of honor to say, "I stayed up all night" and to complain about the list of stressors. And yes, that gets old, but in some groups and cultures, it's more socially acceptable and the social norm. And then in other groups and cultures and particularly men, it is not as cool. There is even a tendency to be unaware of stress, like you said, and to deny it. So let's say in the latest survey, 46% of adults say they're feeling overwhelming stress. And that's a lot, right? We're at almost half the US population, so we know it's a huge problem. But when you look at who it's hitting, there's a story there. Our young adults are feeling a lot of stress knowing it and suffering from it and having hopelessness and depression. Whereas our older adults, more the over 65 group, they have their own issues that they are concerned about and loneliness is higher, but they don't have the despair, they don't have the high levels of stress. In fact, they look really stress resilient. So I think of that as what comes with age, this kind of the wisening in the larger perspective.

Amy Morin:

Interesting. And what do you find most people are stressed out about right now?

Elissa Epel:

Well, the number one area at least on this APA survey was finances, was inflation. And so not being able to make ends meet or feeling really on the edge and restricted is most definitely, unfortunately, one of the most common stressors that people are dealing with. Other areas are we are concerned about the state of affairs. It's not just our personal life and personal drama, but the climate crisis, the war, the polarity, the divisions, we feel people are feeling that.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, absolutely. Which makes sense right now. And as a therapist, a lot of people will come into my therapy office and say, "I just need to get rid of my stress." But what they don't know is you're not going to get rid of stress. It's always going to be there. And in fact, stress can be good for us too. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Elissa Epel:

Yes. It's an important distinction to think of what type of stress people are talking about. So it's that chronic stress that we carry around with us at low levels that we really want to become aware of. There are many strategies to catch that, to notice it, to label it, to release it. Then of course there's acute stress when we [inaudible 00:06:35] to stress response when something happens. And that is absolutely necessary. It's why we are alive. Our ancestors had to fight survival stressors. It's protective and it helps us cope well. It's more just when that becomes part of our daily lifestyle that we're dealing with stressful situations, then we talk about chronic daily stress. And that's what the book really is about. In the day, in the moment, how can we find different tips and tools to tap into the leaky pervasive chronic stress that we live with? We all know what it's like. It puts a real damper on life.

Amy Morin:

It really does, doesn't it? What are some of the problems that come with stress? I know you've done tons of research on this and have written about it extensively about some of the health issues that come about other issues that we experience when we're stressed out.

Elissa Epel:

I was just talking to Michael Rosen, the doctor who kind of developed real age and thinks about lifestyle lot. What I'll say from my perspective is that it's really should be what we're focusing on as a personal goal is to improve our wellbeing. It should be our number one part of our New Year's resolutions because it shapes everything, it shapes our lifestyle. And so we might have weight loss and fitness as chronic goals, but we're not going to get there if we're really feeling high stress. That's what sabotages us when we go through stressful events. It sabotages our New Year's goals and we never reach them.

Anyway, he believe believes that stress is at the heart of all chronic diseases. And as a health psychologist, that's the literature I'm immersed in. And so it really is a contributor to most of the conditions that come with aging. And of course it can exacerbate autoimmune conditions too. It can can weaken our defenses even for the common cold. So there's quite a hefty literature showing how stress impairs immune system, can contribute to high blood pressure, can accelerate the aging in our cells. That's what our studies have been measuring a lot, different ways of measuring aging like inflammation and telomeres. in some studies it's even linked to earlier mortality. So it shouldn't be ignored. We should really take it seriously just like a medical prescription. And that's why I've called the book The Stress Prescription.

Amy Morin:

I like that because how do you now get stressed out to think, "Oh my goodness, so stress is going to kill me and I'm going to die earlier" when we know our mindset and the way we respond to stress is a big part of it, right?

Elissa Epel:

Yes, absolutely. We can stress about stress so easily. And so that's why it's so important to, Amy, go back to your point that we can use positive stress. Short-term bursts of stress to our body are fantastic to us. Obviously exercise, but hot saunas, cold showers, those are methods that are starting to be more studied with a mental health lens. They're powerful. Why not use the power of the body to change the mind to relieve anxiety?

Amy Morin:

That's the thing, right? There's so many things in life that we can't control, but sometimes we can control how we respond to them. And your book is filled with lots of amazing tips and they're easily accessible things, which I really liked too, but I want to just talk about a couple of them. So let's start with the bliss bookends. I love that idea. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Elissa Epel:

Yes. I believe from both science and also from contemplative traditions, there's a lot of arrows pointing to waking up and going to bed. It's really important times for our spiritual and mental wellbeing, times that we can actually determine the trajectory of our day, and for at night determine how good the quality of our sleep is, how much we were able to let go of the day. So the bliss bookends are asking ourselves to step back, not jump into action. Step back when you wake up and just ask yourself a few questions. One is, "What am I looking forward to today?" instead of, "What am I dreading today?" Your mind goes right to kind of, "Oh, such a busy to-do list" and really focusing on "What can I do today to bring joy to someone else?" That's one of the things that we know from the happiness science that really making someone else smile, doing things for other people is a more direct path to happiness than pursuing it directly ourselves.

At night, we can ask ourselves things like "What went better than expected? What was something I'm grateful for that happened today?" These are also dinner table conversations, processing the day with a family or housemates. That turns out to be a really important social time that models coping. So there's plenty of research showing that kind of having family structure and having family dinners is related to lower stress,

better coping in children. So what do you do, Amy, when someone comes to your office? Therapy's an interesting situation because they're bringing you, presenting problems, a lot of big things they want to talk about urgently and they want solutions. How do you see stress playing a role in all this? Do you even think in terms of stress?

Amy Morin:

Yeah, I hear so many people that will be like, "I can't stand this anymore. I have to do something." We take a step back sometimes and figure out, "Well, do you need to tackle the problem or tackle how you feel about the problem?" So often people are investing so much energy into trying to change other people's behavior. They're trying to fix something, or they're complaining about things that they can't change rather than taking action. And then there are those problems that they can't solve. If you have a loved one who's sick or you're struggling financially, and at the moment there aren't a lot of options, you might just need to figure out how do you take care of your feelings. So we often start there with just figuring out what's the answer to that question about what you need to do differently.

Elissa Epel:

Well said. Absolutely beautiful. Those are, I would say, fundamental principles of changing our relationship with stress. Those questions of looking at, "How much can I change? And if I can't change a situation, how do I live with it? How do I live with these strong emotions?" So acceptance is something that's easy to say, but it's a process. Radical acceptance. The other part of the book that I think is useful to people is that stepping back and taking that inventory of looking at the different situations that are weighing on them, anything that stresses them out. And then just asking, "Can you sort those into what I can control? What I can't?" And then the gray bin in between. That's mixed, right? There's some aspects we want to find. "What about this can I control?"

Amy Morin:

Absolutely. So I love that idea of just starting your day with something positive and trying to end it because how easy is it some days to just think about those things that you dread, like, "Oh, it's Monday again." Or, "Here's four meetings I have to go to, or six

things I have to do this week that I'm not looking forward to." What a difference to then say, "What am I looking forward to? How can I make today the best that I can?" And perhaps if you can do that before your feet even hit the floor, before you leave the house, to just get in the right frame of mind. And then I love the idea of ending it too or having positive conversations with your family because how easy is it sometimes to come home and complain about your day as opposed to saying, "Let's talk about the good parts of our day."

Elissa Epel:

Yes, exactly. And it's contagious. So when we bring home work stress, and it's called spillover, we're still kind of radiating those feelings even if we're not aware of it. So it's also really nice transitioning between places and people meetings to take a few minutes to reset, to breathe, to decide "What's your intention for this next last segment of the day? How do you want to be?" The gratitude question is also it's a real lens shifter so that we're not seeing, "Okay, I want things to be different. I want this person to say this or act differently." It's really looking at what we do have and what we can appreciate. And so I view it as a real antidote to the tough situations we live with.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. And there's so much research about gratitude right before bed, how it improves the quality of your sleep. And who doesn't want better quality sleep these days?

Elissa Epel:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

Another one that I loved is you talked about the importance of spending time in nature. And I have to say these days, it's easy for me to do. I live in on a sailboat in the Florida Keys, so the weather's beautiful all the time and I can be outside, but I was struck because I heard a lot of people talking about "I'm going to spend 23 minutes outside in 2023," and their goal is to spend 23 minutes outside every day in terms of a resolution. And for a moment I was like, "Wait, people really don't spend 23 minutes outside?" But

then I remember I used to live in Maine. In the winter in Maine, it's dark out by 4:00 PM and it sometimes is below zero and I thought, "Yeah, when I lived in Maine and I worked from 9:00 to 5:00, I didn't always spend 23 minutes outside. That was really tough to do."

And so I think for those of us, it depends on your lifestyle, where you live, what your work schedule is, how easy or how difficult it is to spend time in nature and where you live, whether you live in the city or a rural area. But you talk a lot in your book about the restorative effects of nature. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Elissa Epel:

Yes. I just love your example. You are so blase because you're immersed in the beauty and the air of nature. And so for us urban dwellers, it's a shock to the system. We feel the difference. We feel the goodness of being in nature. And during the pandemic, so many people discovered nature again and felt its strong effects. The science behind it is strong and fascinating. There really is a restoration effect to our attention, our cognitive abilities. It really does shift our focus from the kind of worrying small mind thinking, that self-referential thought, to a more sensory oriented neural networks where we are actually in our experiential body. Seeing, hearing, smelling, just the vision, the vast horizons and landscapes also shift us, I would say probably unconsciously reduce our vigilance, our nervous system vigilance, because we can see the whole horizon. There's something about that having these vast views that is leading people to feel the nature effect. Sometimes that comes with awe, that real moments of I would say a transcendent emotion.

Amy Morin:

So on a practical level, how can people do that, spend more time in nature? Do you schedule a hike on the weekend? Do you get outside more often? What do you advise people do?

Elissa Epel:

The hike is obviously a great idea because you're doing a lot. You're immersed in nature, you're getting activity, you're probably social. What I focus on is a more of a sensory immersion nature experience. And so the book is focused around 10, 15 minute exercises that people can fit into their day and they can practice and see, "Is this something I want to make a habit, a nudge, a wellbeing lifestyle." And so the nature immersion is really being next to nature, in nature. It can work with a view, but it's better if you're immersed and you're outside. It could be urban nature trees, bee plants in the house. And actually being with nature and remembering that we are part of nature. We're not separate. I mean, we're really more monkeys in clothes than we really realize because our bodies responding to all of these safety cues around us that nature gives us.

So looking, smelling, touching, feeling, and breathing more slowly lead us into an immersive state that I call deep rest, or at least green mind, getting us closer to blue mind. So we usually were in yellow mind where we have really busy mind. I mean, especially for these urban dwellers, like me, we're bombarded by stimuli outside and the streets. And of course our screens do a good job of bombardment. So it's so wonderful to unplug, unhook even if it's for five or 10 minutes.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. And I like that you even talk about house plants. So that if you live in an apartment and you don't have a lot of green space outside, maybe you can bring it indoors too.

Elissa Epel:

And looking at it carefully, get a wild plant. And so that there's some beauty to the complexity. But even looking up close at any of these nature objects is a mindful immersive exercise.

Amy Morin:

I like that. I also appreciated that in your book you talk about deep rest because so often people will say, "I'm just going to relax and watch TV," or they spend time scrolling

through their phone, but that doesn't really rejuvenate them and make them feel better. So can you explain a little bit about the concept of deep rest?

Elissa Epel:

I will. I think scrolling through our phone is such a great example of the opposite, of using our little breaks of time on something that it maybe is compulsive, right? I feel like I'm pretty compulsive around my phone. That satisfies a certain curiosity, but it is far from restorative. It's the opposite, even if we don't notice that people have worse mood after exposure to social media. Deep rest is really engaging in an ease or relaxed state where we're not doing anything. And so typically this is during mind body practices, yoga, Shavasana, meditation, moving meditation like Tai Chi or Qigong. Those are the best examples. But just simply lying and listening to music or slowly breathing brings us to the common foundation of what deep rest is. It's slowing our breathing, which is shifting our autonomic nervous system toward more parasympathetic balance and allowing our body to feel safe. So that feeling of safety is a critical ingredient if we're going to release and let go of the embodied stress we carry.

Amy Morin:

Why is that so scary? Because I know some of our listeners, just the thought of doing something like meditation, yoga, slowing down, raises their anxiety level. Why is that?

Elissa Epel:

That's right. There's a lot of personality to this. Some people are going to gravitate toward those positive stress exercises that we mentioned, the hot, the sauna, the cold. Those are great for metabolizing stress in our body, but we also do need the restorative breaks when our cells are able to actually do housekeeping. If we are able to disengage and do something like meditation or slow breathing, we're changing the signals to ourselves and saying, "You can stop fighting diseases and stress and keeping the immune system elevated." And you can actually work on more of the repair processes, DNA repair. I mean, there's constant repair going on in our cells, or at least at a low level. So we can consciously say, "I'm going to get some deep breaths." It could be a massage, could be yoga. It involves a closed door, it involves seclusion, and that's

where the feeling safe enough to turn off your phone and to be alone in a secluded place are probably good prerequisites for setting the environment and the tone.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. And how many people really find time to do that or make the time to do it, because people will say, "Well, I'm busy. I have so many things to do"? But obviously, how could you not make time to do these really important things could be the flip side of that coin.

Elissa Epel:

Well, it's a great question. That's exactly how I feel. I do not get enough deep rest. I really feel it. If I'm on a retreat, which is a total luxury, you're having days of deep rest on top of one another. And I see dramatic changes in my self-monitoring, my aura ring, looking at my own kind of heart rate and heart rate variability and sleep. And those are big resets. But on a daily basis, we really could value this more and realize that less is more. Doing less is more to our body and our health and our wellbeing.

Amy Morin:

What an important message. Another strategy that you talk about is to find excitement and challenges, which is tough to do sometimes too. But can you explain that?

Elissa Epel:

That goes back to this mindset, how much our bodies is listening to our beliefs and what we're saying to ourselves, our self-talk. So this is an area that psychologists have studied pretty well in a narrow way, looking at, "Do we believe stress is bad for us? Can we actually remind ourselves of the ways that acute stress is good for us? My body's excited. My body loves this. My body's made for this." Those statements help us, especially for anxiety, it sense it, and we hate the feeling of stress. The stress, the heart rate, et cetera, stresses us out even more. So believing that we are having an engaged positive stress response that's going to help us is a real switch. It's a switch in our mind. It's a switch in our physiology.

Many people, particularly Wendy Mendez, my colleague at UCSF, have studied these two responses, the threat response versus this positive challenge response in the lab and in real life. There is no doubt that when we can go in with these positive beliefs about stress or about our ability to cope, we have less of the more painful emotions of threat, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, and more of the positive emotions, enthusiastic, hopeful, confident. We recover more quickly, physiologically. We have more positive emotion at the end of a stressful event.

Amy Morin:

That was one thing I learned when I first started doing public speaking. My heart would race and my palms are sweaty and just feel terrified. But then if I could tell myself like, "Nah, my body's excited about this," just making that shift made a huge difference. Suddenly I'd get out there and I could convince myself that "I was just excited. This is huge. This is an amazing opportunity" and I didn't feel so nervous anymore. I'm pretty sure my performance improved too once I made that switch.

Elissa Epel:

Yeah, that's a great example. Public speaking is the worst for so many people. I think the ability too, when you're having a stress response, just to know that your body's trying to help you, it's just yet another resource.

Amy Morin:

Right. Okay. How do you get through it when you're faced with life's inevitable curve balls? Maybe your loved one is ill and you're helping take care of them, or you're faced with a financial crisis and you're struggling and it's going to be something you're going to go through for a while. What can you do during those, especially stressful times in life to get through them?

Elissa Epel:

Yes. Hard to get through, and they go on and on and you don't know when they're going to end. We all have some of those situations either now or going forward. That is where we carry the stress with us from day to day because we're trying to problem solve.

We're thinking about it. We're wanting to do better. We're wanting to relieve suffering of another person. Most of those we don't control. So it's important to do some of these daily stress nudges to check in and say, "What am I holding? Am I trying to solve something that is not really solvable?" Because we spend a lot of time doing that, and becoming aware of that helps.

But what you're really talking about, I think, goes back to what you were saying earlier. When we have these situations that are painful because we care so much, but we can't solve them, it comes down to really living well with them through acceptance, through letting go of what we can't control, and having compassion, compassion both for people who are going through this, including ourself. So hard to have self-compassion for many people. It's such a critical ingredient if we can feel self-love, we can emanate self-love to others.

Amy Morin:

Absolutely. One last question for you. For somebody who's listening and they say, "Gosh, I'm really stressed out right now. I know that I am, but I don't even know where to start or what to do," what would be your one piece of advice or tip for them about where to start managing their stress?

Elissa Epel:

It's such a good question. Well, I do think the stress inventory, taking a step back, reflecting, making a list, trying to prioritize "What can I control here?" Trying to notice what the biggest things are and how you can release the stressor carrying around from them through some daily practices. It could be mindset, it could be working out stress in the body. It could be changing the environment like the nature immersion or the meditation, and choosing one that you know can do, and just trying it every day for a week and seeing how that nudges you toward feeling ease toward really releasing the stress that we carry around so tightly.

Amy Morin:

I like that because no matter how stressed out we are, there are always other things we can try and there's always room for improvement.

Elissa Epel:

Yes. Can I throw that question back at you? Since you're constantly helping people problem solve the big situations that we can't change, caring about someone who is maybe not caring well for themselves?

Amy Morin:

Yeah, definitely. So in my case, I'm a runner. I enjoy running. Being in nature, being outside as much as I can I will say definitely helps. And talking to other people, having supportive friends and family. I think social support is hugely important for me. And reaching out to people when I need that support is something that I find really helpful.

Elissa Epel:

Yeah, probably the most fundamental way to reduce stress as social mammals. And the best thing people can do with the stress reduction book is try it with a friend.

Amy Morin:

I love that. Well, Dr. Elissa Epel, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with us. I hope all of our listeners go pick up a copy of *The Stressed Prescription*.

Elissa Epel:

Thank you so much, Amy. Thank you for your work in this world.

Amy Morin:

I appreciate it.

Welcome to *The Therapist's Take*! This is a part of the show where I'll give you my take on some of my favorite strategies that our guests share. Here are three of my favorite strategies from Dr. Epel.

Number one: do something kind for someone else. When you're stressed out, I know the last thing you probably feel like doing is something nice for someone else. In fact, you might be really quick to convince yourself that you aren't in a position to show kindness, and you might feel like you're in a vulnerable spot where you could easily be taken advantage of. But research repeatedly shows that acts of kindness boost your mood. And when you feel better, you feel less stressed. To do something kind, you don't have to necessarily do anything huge. Don't offer to help someone with a big project when you don't have any time, and don't give money if you're in a dire financial circumstance yourself. But you can always at least offer kind words or compliments, a genuine smile, or compassion to anyone. And by doing so, not only might you help them, but it might reduce your stress too.

Number two: engage in deep rest. I love that Dr. Epel talked about deep rest. It's not something you hear much about. Instead, you're more likely to hear smaller-scale things you can do to reduce stress. And those things work, but they're not enough to manage our chronic stress. When is the last time in your life that you engaged in something that gave you deep rest? Do you take a vacation sometimes to actually get away from work and relax? Do you spend a lot of time in nature? Do you get away from your electronics? Sometimes it's good to do things that force you to take a break. Like sometimes I like to go hiking where phones don't even work. It's a good reminder that I can survive without technology, and I don't feel pressure to actually try and check my phone. So look for opportunities in your life to engage in deep rest and make it a priority.

Number three: look at stressful events as a challenge, not an obstacle. Changing your mindset goes a long way toward helping you feel better and toward helping you cope. So no matter what you're faced with, you might benefit from reminding yourself that you're facing a challenge that you can address, not an obstacle that's going to keep you stuck. And you might find some creative ways to solve a problem, or you might not feel quite as panicked about the possibility that things might not turn out the way you hope. That mindset can help you feel better and ultimately might help you do better. But don't get me wrong, I know that when you're facing really hard things in life, it feels superficial to tell yourself, "Oh, this is just a challenge." So you don't have to sugarcoat

things and try to convince yourself that something horrible isn't going on if it really is. But when it comes to less serious stressful events, keep things in perspective.

So those are three of Dr. Epel's strategies that I highly recommend for managing stress. Do something kind for someone else, engage in deep rest, and tell yourself that you're facing a challenge (not an obstacle).

To hear more of Dr. Epel's tips, pick up a copy of her book, *The Stress Prescription*.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share this show with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called "10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential." To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!* And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (whom I only met because Jimmy Buffett didn't answer the phone one day — true story), Nick Valentin.